

## **Executive Summary**

In the 2006–2007 school year, 13 Montana Reading First schools (cohort 2) were in their second year of grant implementation. In addition to grant funds, they received regular professional development and technical assistance from state project staff members. The 20 schools from cohort 1, who finished their three-year grant cycle last year, moved into a continuation phase and received less support from the state.

The 2006–2007 evaluation of Montana Reading First found evidence of strong program implementation and continued growth in student achievement. State project staff members provided professional development and technical assistance to support schools in their implementation of Reading First. In turn, school and district staff members worked hard to deepen their implementation and improve student outcomes. By the spring, over two-thirds of Montana Reading First students were at benchmark, representing statistically significant increases in every grade from the beginning of the year.

The evaluation focused on data collection from cohort 2 schools. Some data concerning implementation and outcomes were collected from cohort 1 schools. The following findings include key successes and challenges during the 2006–2007 school year, as well as an overview of student outcomes.

### **Cohort 2 Professional Development and Technical Assistance**

Again this year, teachers gave high ratings to the Summer Institute and most teachers felt that their overall professional development in reading was relevant, sustained, and intensive. At the school level, the reading coach provided the majority of professional development to teachers. Coaches continued to be a presence in teachers' classrooms, although the amount varied from school to school. Many teachers found assistance from the coach helpful, although not everyone believed that the coach had helped improve their instruction and some teachers wanted more support from their coach.

Cohort 2 schools continued to hold study groups to review research and materials related to reading instruction. About half of teachers found these meetings useful; a slight increase from last year. However, perceptions of study groups declined among principals and particularly among coaches.

Study groups downloaded materials from Knowledge Box, a digital learning software which was also used for other school-level professional development and lesson planning. Both the frequency of use and perceived utility of Knowledge Box increased from the previous year.

Overall, coaches and principals were pleased with training from the state, although there was a slight decline in satisfaction from last year. Coaches requested additional training in several topic areas related to coaching as well as interventions. About one-fourth of principals wanted more training in instructional leadership; other principal needs were very diverse. Travel to meetings was a frustration for a few principals.

Most principals and coaches were also pleased with the technical assistance they received from state project staff members this year, including state reading specialists. Most principals and coaches, although smaller percentages than last year, found their specialists valuable, responsive, and trustworthy.

### **Cohort 2 Leadership**

The level of support for Reading First from districts was sufficient, according to most principals. Districts themselves were satisfied with state support for Reading First.

Various data suggest that principal leadership was generally strong, but not uniformly so. This year, principals were in classrooms less frequently than the previous year and their attendance at reading meetings varied from school to school, even though most principals felt that these meetings were a good use of their time. Most teachers viewed their principal as a strong advocate for reading and almost all principals had high buy-in to the grant.

Reading coaches continued to work long hours (an average of 49 hours per week) on a variety of Reading First responsibilities. While they spent more time actually coaching this year, a fairly high percentage of coaches were still unclear about their role and there was a large amount of variance in the ways they spent their time.

Support for Reading First remained very high among coaches and principals. The picture was somewhat mixed among teachers; coaches reported that teacher resistance was still an issue in some schools and not all teachers strongly supported the instructional changes occurring under Reading First. At the same time, teacher support for the core program and DIBELS assessment increased from last year, they valued collaborative structures established under the grant, and few teachers said they would return to their old ways of teaching after the grant ended. Of particular note, teachers from schools serving high percentages of Native American students expressed greater buy-in to Reading First than their peers from schools with mostly white students.

All schools had Reading Leadership Teams (RLTs) which met fairly regularly for various purposes such as examining data and sharing information from the state. Many participants rated their RLTs as useful, although grade-level meetings were seen as even more useful. Most teachers met with their grade-level colleagues at least twice a month, described the meeting topics as important, and said their viewpoints were welcomed.

Data use in cohort 2 schools was high in 2006–2007. In addition to benchmark assessments given three times a year, progress monitoring of strategic and intensive students was frequent in most schools. Coaches were confident that administration was consistent and reliable. In addition, teachers' weekly use of data increased noticeably from the previous year, and a higher percentage of teachers felt that DIBELS was a reliable assessment (although many felt it was overused).

## **Cohort 2 Instruction and Interventions**

All cohort 2 schools reported a reading block of at least 90 minutes in grades 1–3 (60 minutes in kindergarten) and high fidelity to a core reading program. Teachers' satisfaction with their core program increased after their second year of using the materials and many believed that expectations to use the core program materials were reasonable.

While teachers indicated that they regularly used many strong instructional practices, these findings have limitations because they stem from self-report survey data (no classroom observations were conducted by evaluators in 2006–2007). Paraprofessionals, small class sizes, and working with groups during the reading block were all reported as helping teachers differentiate their instruction. Some teachers, especially those without those supports, were frustrated by the inability to differentiate during the reading block, although they noted there were other times during the school day when differentiation could occur.

Interventions of at least 12 hours in duration were delivered to approximately 41 percent of all Reading First students. Coaches reported an additional 27 percent of students received interventions of less than 12 hours. These were most often provided by paraprofessionals, coaches, or specialists and were usually delivered in groups of less than six students. Although all schools had intervention systems, a notable proportion of teachers and coaches believed that these systems were not yet sufficient to meet the needs of their struggling students.

## **Cohort 1 Implementation**

As part of their continuation grants, cohort 1 schools were expected to continue implementing most aspects of Reading First, but the level of assistance from the state was scaled back. All but three schools maintained at least a part-time reading coach. Data indicate that the level of implementation remained the same or even increased from the previous year. That is, schools continued to implement 90-minute reading blocks, use their core program with fidelity, and administer benchmark assessments. Furthermore, principals and coaches continued to be a visible presence in classrooms and staff buy-in to Reading First remained the same.

There were a few areas where the level of implementation declined. There was a slight decline in the frequency of reading-related meetings (Reading Leadership Teams and grade-level) and a small decline in the percentage of schools that reported progress monitoring in all classrooms. There were more substantial decreases in three areas:

- Teachers reported declines in both the amount and quality of professional development in reading
- Teachers reported a decline in their weekly use of data and their use of data to look at schoolwide trends
- Fewer students received interventions

Despite these declines, achievement among cohort 1 schools continued on a similar trajectory as compared to past years with minor exceptions.

### **Student Assessment Results**

In spring 2007, the following percentages of students at each grade level were at benchmark on the DIBELS:

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Kindergarten	79%	75%
Grade 1	70%	71%
Grade 2	65%	66%
Grade 3	59%	57%

For both cohorts, this represented statistically significant increases from fall 2006 to spring 2007.

**Cohort 1.** While there was a statistically significant increase in the percentages of students at benchmark from fall to spring in cohort 1, moving students out of the intensive category was somewhat more challenging.

In most grades there has been sustained, continued growth in the percentages of students at benchmark and a decrease in the percentages of students in intensive over four years. In contrast, there was a decrease in the percentage of second graders at benchmark, and movement out of intensive slowed in grades one and two.

A longitudinal examination of students who have been in Reading First for four years showed a 71 percent total effectiveness rate. That is, almost three out of four students progressed out of the strategic or intensive category, or remained at benchmark after four years.

**Cohort 2.** From fall 2006 to spring 2007, there were statistically significant increases in the percentages of cohort 2 students at benchmark. In three of four grades, the decreases in the percentages of students in intensive were also significant.

Compared to last year, there were increases in the percentages of students at benchmark and decreases in the percentages of students in intensive in all grades. These data were only significant in kindergarten. However, the sample size should be considered when interpreting these findings since similar changes over time in cohort 1 (with more students) were significant. As is true of all statistical analyses, a small sample size gives evaluators less power to detect significant differences.

**Variations in Student Achievement.** Native American students comprise approximately one-third of all Montana Reading First students. Their progress in kindergarten and grade 1 from fall 2006 to spring 2007 slightly outpaced their peers in terms of the percentages of students at benchmark. However, gaps between Native American students and their white

peers remained in every grade and were particularly wide in grades two and three. For example, 64 percent of white students were at benchmark in grade 3 compared to 46 percent of their Native American peers.

The rate of growth for kindergarten students eligible for Free and Reduced-price lunch (FRL) slightly outpaced their non-eligible counterparts in kindergarten and grade one. However, their growth was slower in grades two and three where the achievement gap also remained the widest.

## **Recommendations**

In addition to noting several data trends for the state to consider in planning the 2007–2008 school year, evaluators made the following recommendations based on report findings:

- Provide additional supports to reading coaches in cohort 2 to help clarify their roles and further improve their coaching skills.
- Further investigate and address issues related to low performance of Native American students.
- Focus on the provision of interventions with cohort 1 schools.

Evaluators also recommended that the state continue to use the evaluation findings for multiple purposes. Details of the recommendations are found in the final chapter of the report.

